

The Integration of the Arts

By Carlos Raúl Villanueva

THE arts bear witness to the cultural meaning of each period; we can discover the features that marked a historic individuality thanks to them. The more they demonstrate the union of concept or formal participation between them, the more clearly the social axis around which the man/culture duality revolves unfolds itself. The presence of this axis favours the agglutination of artistic expression. What is more, the unity of human content is fertile and a necessary condition so that the total integration flourishes. Architecture, painting, sculpture and technique combine around a common aim, around a collective purpose. The coming together of objectives facilitates the plastic synthesis.

At the moment, within this synthesis, due to its adherence to functional themes, architecture holds the responsibility for first defining the generalities, for sketching, right from the start, the directives of sculpture within which plastic events will take form.

Architecture, with the help of technique, organises the space. It can exist on its own, with its single organism, isolated and autonomous, without the collaboration of the other arts, such as in certain Romanesque churches or in the austere vertical architecture of Mies van der Rohe.

At other times, different plastic expression prevails. Sometimes it is sculpture that predominates in the formal play, in the volumetric balance and focuses the main interest of the composition on itself. As in the case of the architecture of India or in the impressive pre-Columbian constructions, sculptural-type plastic art substitutes architecture. In other words, due to the metaphysical characteristics of the vital and religious approach of these people, architecture organically conceived as a closed space, as an internal space, is superseded in favour of a monumental conception of plastic art as an external event, aimed more at the praising or mystical valuation of a life that is transcendental and external to man, than at the pragmatic recognition of human actions. On other occasions, it is painting which ostensibly marks the space and the content of architecture. In these cases, the theme and the form with which this content is treated surpass the value of the walls that receive them in importance, in vigour, in

overbearing isolation. These pictorial themes are therefore worthwhile per se, independently of the architectural space in which they are found. What is more, it is them that give the characteristic stamp to this environment. The example of this is the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo, in which the pictorial values are evidently superior to the architectural space and totally indifferent or neutral with regard to them.

When the world of plastic arts is impregnated by a single concept, when it is dealt with by a single philosophy, when a single vision enriches its components, the arts coexist in the same terrain (often in contact with them), but they do not necessarily tie in to the total merger. The integrating effort is not necessary. Total union is not necessary, either as an intention or as a consequence of joint work. Nevertheless, these works that flourished in a single period, sheltered by a single sentiment, show a unity of constant form in a careful analysis.

This is the result of what has been called "spirit of the times" and is also the product of the cultural contacts and mixtures that have been more or less frequent, in keeping with the greater or lesser ease of communication and transmission of culture. In the photos I will show you below, the persistence of certain shapes that are born in cultural fields that are very far removed from each other will be clearly noticeable. They show the permeability of the various artistic events and the extremely important influence that the same technique, with its rigorous approach dictated by function, has had on artistic vision.

There are moments of crisis when the arts separate and each one proceeds, looking for its individual way. Even if they deal with the same themes, the languages are different and at times extremely individualised. This happens when it is necessary to reconstruct a language, overcoming a syntax and a grammar that have been worn out by use and that no longer correspond to the new human contents. At these moments, there is a unity of proposals concentrated in the search for an elemental plastic art (sometimes starting from nothing), which leads to the elaboration of original, new and suitable terms along new paths. At these times, the features that make up the

internal structure of each artistic approach must become separated, be analysed, even be sterilised (if necessary), so that after a long analytical job, the basis of a more specific instruction can be laid, of a more far-reaching, conclusive and deep narration, in which the relationship between content and form is more explicit and ties together the two terms with more cohesion. The crisis that occurred during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century gave rise to a search for cleanliness of language that could serve to clarify the above. In fact, by heightening the contradictions between the new technique and the old decoration, between the new social controversy and the old forms, the 20th-century man, who was born with his eye set on the immense possibilities and transformations offered by machinery, went back to elaborating the basic features of his language, cleanly separating each of them from artistic expressions. It was only later, when this language had already been elaborated, that the need and, therefore, the possibility of going back to integrating these dispersed features was announced.

Why is artistic integration, at the moment, proposed by architects and by painters and sculptors as one of the most important aims, as one of the most immediate objectives to be achieved?

Why does the painter go to the architect and ask him to give him the opportunity to work with him in the field of architecture?

Why does the architect feel the need to call on painters so that their colour makes his architectural surfaces vibrate?

The reason, in our opinion, stems from the fact that the architect, on the one hand, wishes to look more deeply into the meaning of his architecture; seeks a greater enriching of the plastic values of it, through a more controlled, wise and careful use of the instruments which have traditionally been those that are typical of the painter: colours, lines and shapes.

On the other hand, the painter and sculptor have just come out of one personalised, individualised tradition, to go into another one which announces human intervention as a symbol of social adherence, of human and collective kindness, as a mark of responsibility. What painting or sculpture stop offering as a value of communication (above all if they are released from individual arbitrariness) is transformed into an effort to try to reincorporate art into society through a rapprochement, a more functional relationship that is more direct and more necessary. Introducing pictorial or sculptural work into the architectural context currently means showing a clear desire to take on social responsibilities.

Is it necessary to repeat that the contemporary artist can no longer create for himself in a personal world

whose comprehension is circumscribed to a limited number of people or that floats in the sterile isolation of individual action?

Well, it is precisely as a reaction to all there is that the artist approaches the architect and offers his collaboration. This is a call so that his plastic vision is allowed to take on another meaning and social transcendence. This attempt to collaborate is not carried out before resolving a wide range of problems. It is clear that a collaboration between artists, for the purpose of integration, can have no consequence without a team spirit, without solidarity in the work and companionship. In the same way, it is necessary that painters and sculptors should have a more or less clear idea of the way in which the architect works, of his possibilities as an artist and of his determining features as a technician. The spatial vision that is typical of the architect must be understood and used by the painter. In the same way, the architect will have to take into account the particular medium with which the painter or the sculptor work. Whether on surfaces or in volumes, he must respect their method of creation. There is a substantial difference between an integrating piece of work and an attempt at decoration. Decoration, in our times, is considered as a surface preparation, as something that is superimposed and as such, useless and even hostile for architectural purposes. On the other hand, integration is the product, not only of the understanding of the common proposals, but also of the necessary subordination between the different expressions. It is the creation of a new architectural-sculptural-pictorial organism, in which the smallest indecision is not noticed, in which no crack between the various expressions can be found. What is necessary of each of these plastic valuations must be irremediably evident.

Colour represents an immense energy for the architect. It is, to him, a medium as powerful as the plan and the section to determine a space. As Léger said, "the craving for colour is a natural necessity just as for water and fire". There was an enormous scandal, more than a century ago when the archaeologist Hittford discovered a Hellenic temple in Sicily with traces of polychrome on its pediments. In fact, the upper parts of Greek temples were painted in bright, pure colours. We also know that the Egyptians painted the relieves on walls, with the aim of highlighting and making the parts of the temple which were required to be accentuated more visible. The Romans seem to have been the first to have left materials, marble or stone, without any polychromatic decoration, reserving the pleasure of their frescoes for stucco. In mediæval times, cathedrals also had examples of polychrome. Notre Dame in Paris had its tympani painted in gold and bright colours. Its sculptures were noticeable as they

were painted in black, red and bright colours. During the Renaissance, internal spaces left behind the vibrations of colour to acquire their geometric rigour of white surfaces. However in the Baroque period they made the most of all the resources of paint to maximise their attempts at distortion and optical illusion. Baroque domes, in fact, with their vertical perspective, undo the measurable space, project the enormous, voluptuously decorated masses, the thicker material that boils on the walls and on the base of the internal space, towards the sky.

Colour also has its use as an instrument for ordering, rectifying, specifying or valuing volumes and surfaces, accentuating frames, confirming spaces. However, used in this way, it is just an instrument like any other used by the architect, to establish a more immediate communication between his work and the man who will use it.

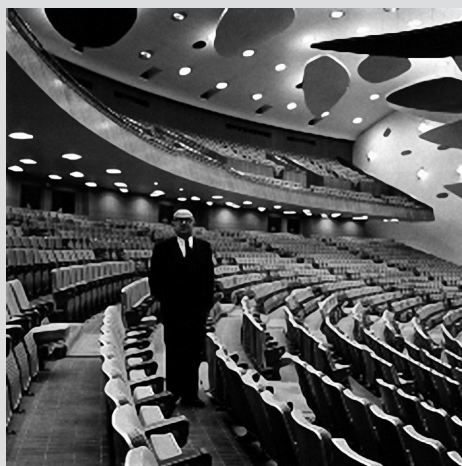
For today's architect, construction materials have a character of their own and require to be used in keeping with this character, respecting it and giving it value. This is why it is confirmed that every material has a texture

and colour of its own that should be used, preserving the inherent properties of its organic constitution. The artist who does the integration work must also know how to understand and respect the character of these materials, because by doing so he will manage to capture the true sense of what we call need in integration.

There is no synthesis without discipline. There is no synthesis without enthusiasm. There is no synthesis without faith in human values.

It would be a good idea to remember with Michel Ragon that, in the same way that lions should not be kept in zoos, paintings and sculptures should not be imprisoned in museums.

The natural environment for wild animals is the jungle. The natural environment for artistic work is squares, gardens, public buildings, factories, airports: all the places where man perceives man as a companion, as an associate, as a helping hand, as hope and not as the withered flower of isolation and indifference.



Carlos Raúl Villanueva in the University of Caracas Aula Magna, 1967
Photo Paolo Gasparini
(Fundación Villanueva Collection)

Villanueva was born in the city of London on May 30, 1900. In 1922, following the footsteps of his brother Marcel, Carlos Raúl was admitted to the Second Class of the Department of Architecture of the *École des Beaux-Arts* and entered the workshop of Gabriel Héraud. In 1925 he entered the First Class of the Department of Architecture and worked closely with León Joseph Madeline. During that time he collaborated on a project for a *Hôtel d'ambassade à construire dans un pays d'Extrême Orient* with another student of Héraud's workshop, Roger-Leopold Hummel, which won the Second prize of the Grand Prix de Rome in 1928. On June 6 of the same year, he received his Architecture degree and traveled for the first time to Venezuela and the United States where he joined the architectural firm Guilbert and Betelle with his brother in Newark, New Jersey. Yet in 1929 Villanueva returned to Venezuela and started working in the Ministry of Public Works as Director of Buildings and Ornamental Constructions.

After gaining some experience in France and the United States,

Villanueva arrives in Venezuela full of enthusiasm and ideas; in particular, thanks to the influence of his close friend Auguste Perret. His first important commission came in 1935 with the project to build the Museum of Fine Arts of Caracas. This project allowed him to create a space for the exhibition of art, one of his most important passions. Already at this time his devotion to the artistic vanguards of the century could be seen in his library, where his large collection of books on architecture was complemented by those on art. It was also during this time that he met the sculptor Francisco Narváez with whom he collaborated in the Museum of Fine Arts as well as in a series of other important projects like the "Natural Science Museum" (1936-1939) and the "Gran Colombia School" (1939-1942) which became Villanueva's first attempt to bring into fruition the guiding principle of career: the synthesis of the arts. The buildings also showed Villanueva's application of some of the most defining ideas of modern architecture like the simplification of form and the importance given to functionality.